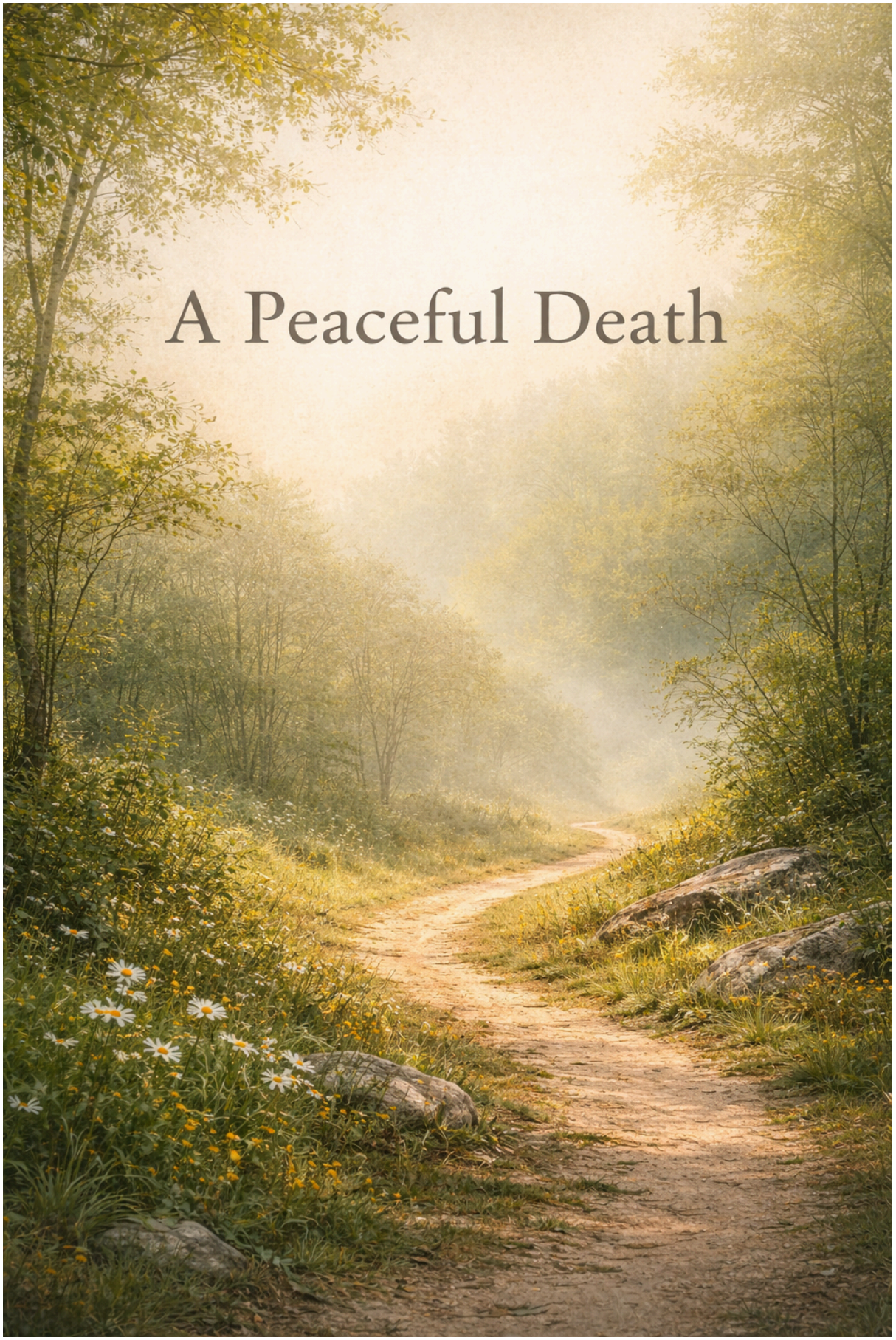
A Peaceful Death

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(Hillside Hermitage Talk no.337hh - edited transcript)

YouTube
Aṅguttara Nikāya 5.121 Gilānasutta
Saṁyutta Nikāya 36.7 Pathamagelañña sutta

Bhikkhu: I have a few questions from a friend, he says, "Bhante, I've received a diagnosis of a terminal illness. I understand that we all face mortality, but I now have a clearer timeline for my own. I've accepted this reality and feel a strong sense of urgency to deepen my spiritual practice. It may be too late, but I want to make the most of the time I have left. Could you kindly suggest specific contemplations or practices that might aid me on this journey?"

Ajahn Nyanamoli: The practice doesn't change. Whether you have a lot of time left or a little, it is the same gradual process, the same gradual training. The gradual training we often talk about—well, now that person will have to condense it into a much shorter period of time. Take the precepts even more seriously. Practice sense restraint twice as hard. Withdraw from unwholesome states, exerting yourself in complete seclusion from others, and grasp the signs of the mind.

It is always the same pathway. As the Buddha said when he discovered the Dhamma, it was like an ancient path that people in the past had walked. It is always the same.

The Difference Between an Ariya and a Puthujjana

B: It reminds me of a sutta in the Anguttara Nikaya. It says,

> "*Bhikkhus, if five things do not slip away from a frail and sick bhikkhu, it can be expected of him in no long time, with the destruction of the taints, he will realize for himself the liberation of mind." These five things are: a bhikkhu dwells contemplating the unattractiveness of the body, perceiving the repulsiveness of food, perceiving non-delight in the entire world,*

> *contemplating anicca, and he has the perception of death well established internally. If these five things do not slip away from a frail and dying bhikkhu, it will be expected that he will...*

Nm: Yes, however, the difference there is that the dying bhikkhu is an *ariya*. He is not a *puthujjana*. He already has the right view. He just hasn't completely reached liberation and the destruction of the taints, as it says there. He would reach the destruction of taints if he establishes himself in those five things, having had the right view beforehand.

I presume that this person who says, "*My time is short now, I haven't practiced as much before, now I have a timeline and want to practice harder,"* does not even have the right view. For that, again, the answer is the gradual training. There is no shortcut. It is just that the long journey can be traveled faster if you double down on your efforts.

Increase the amount, double them up, and take it seriously. Do not look at anything unwholesome. Do not think about anything unwholesome. Withdraw yourself, exert yourself in seclusion and secluded places for as long as you can, and grasp the signs of the mind. Listen to our talks about the signs of the mind, because that is a precursor to the right view.

Sure, you can contemplate illness and repulsiveness. But that only results in liberation from the destruction of taints if you already know what the practice is. If you have the right view, then those contemplations will amplify it.

B: An ordinary person facing death is obviously afraid, thinking, "I haven't been practicing."

Nm: That is the thing, really. Everybody is facing death. That terminally ill person might actually live longer than somebody else who is not *terminally ill.* It is really just the recognition of the inevitable in their case. Sometimes that is what people need to make them take the practice seriously.

But there is no special contemplation that can provide a shortcut for you. It is still the same path you have to walk, the same distance. But yes, you can walk it faster if you

take the steps of the gradual training more seriously. Seeing danger in the slightest fault, moderation in eating—all of that is building up, intensifying, and amplifying.

Physical Seclusion and Grasping the Sign of the Mind

And physical seclusion is a prerequisite for grasping the signs of the mind. For somebody to grasp the signs of the mind without having been physically secluded is impossible.

If you do have physical seclusion and have been practicing sense restraint, virtue, and everything leading up to it, and you are able to endure it rightly, it is quite possible you will grasp the signs of your mind. You will start seeing your own mind as a phenomenon, as an entity that exists parallel to this body, neither of which really belongs to you. You will be able to see it in a correct third-person sense, like a wild animal that needs taming.

You will be able to unidentify yourself with it by default. Usually, you are identified by default. You don't even see the mind. You don't even see it as a thing. You might have conceptual ideas about it, but you don't see it as a phenomenon existing there while you are thinking about it. To see it, you need to develop that gradual training and solitude, and then these things can become apparent. That would be my advice: strive for that before time runs out.

The Illusion of a Peaceful Death

B: I have sometimes heard advice like, "*Be grateful for the things that have happened in your life. Think about all the good things, and in this way you will have a peaceful death.*"

Nm: The idea of a peaceful death usually comes from people who do not contemplate death correctly; they are still intoxicated with life. They project this fantasy of dying peacefully—peaceful from the point of view of an external observer, what *looks* peaceful.

The only peaceful death is the death of an *arahant*. That is the only state of the five aggregates that has been freed from any traces of resistance, of *patigha*. If there is still resistance, there will be tension felt when death occurs, because it is not

completely dispassionate. If you want to experience a peaceful death, you need to become an *arahant*. If you want to experience a largely peaceful, less unpeaceful death, become at least a *sotapanna*.

That is the true measure of peace, not how you look externally. Sometimes people look externally peaceful just because they have been wiped away by their illness and there is absolutely no energy or strength left. It just looks peaceful. But internally, if the mind has not been developed in dispassion and disenchantment, there will be no peace.

That is pretty much what I am describing. Develop the sign of the mind, acquire the right view, and you are already a step closer to being unmoved by death. If in your spare time you want to practice gratitude, visualize happy, lofty ideas, and so on, do that. But do not conflate that with the practice of the right view and the gradual training, because it has nothing to do with it. It is more about making yourself feel better because you still do not know the escape. And admitting to yourself that you do not know the escape, is a good place to start.

If your concern is just about making yourself feel better, you won't be practicing towards the right view, because practicing towards the right view won't make you feel better initially. It is just going to make you feel worse, because you are uncovering things that you have been covering up through various means such as thinking thoughts of gratitude.

They do not need to be mutually exclusive in theory, but practically they are mutually exclusive for somebody at that stage. You would not be able to make yourself feel better and simultaneously practice for the right view if the value of feeling good is still more important to you. But I think this person has realized that. Having been diagnosed with a terminal illness, they are asking the right things: "What do I do to speed up what I haven't done before?"

Aṅguttara Nikāya 5.121 Gilānasutta

At one time, the Blessed One was dwelling in Vesālī, at the Peaked-Roof Hall in the Great Wood. Then, having arisen from seclusion in the evening, the Blessed One approached the sick-ward.

The Blessed One saw a certain bhikkhu who was weak and sick. Upon seeing him, he sat down on the prepared seat. Having sat down, the Blessed One addressed them:

"If five things are not neglected by any weak and sick bhikkhu, this is to be expected for him:
'Before long, through the destruction of the taints, the taintless liberation of citta and liberation by wisdom will be realized, attained, and experienced by oneself with direct knowledge in this very seen dhamma.'

"What are the five?
"Here, a bhikkhu lives discerning asubha in the physical body; he has the perception of repulsiveness of food; he has the perception of non-delight in the entire world; he lives discerning anicca in all sankharas; and the perception of death is well-established internally for him.

"If those five things are not neglected by any weak and sick bhikkhu, this is to be expected for him:
'Before long, through the destruction of the taints, the taintless liberation of citta and liberation by wisdom will be realized, attained, and experienced by oneself with direct knowledge in this very seen dhamma.'

Saṁyutta Nikāya 36.7 Paṭhamagelaññasutta

On one occasion, the Blessed One was dwelling at Vesālī in the Great Wood, in the Hall with the Peaked Roof. Emerging from seclusion in the evening, he approached

the sick ward and sat down on the prepared seat. Having sat down, the Blessed One addressed them:
"A bhikkhu should *await his time* (death) with sati and clear comprehension. This is our instruction to you.

Instruction on Sati and Clear Comprehension
"And how is a bhikkhu with sati?
Here, a bhikkhu dwells discerning the kāya in the kāya—ardent, clearly comprehending, and possessed of sati—having removed covetousness and domanassa regarding the world. He dwells discerning vedanā in vedanās... He dwells discerning citta in citta... He dwells discerning dhammās in dhammās—ardent, clearly comprehending, and possessed of sati—having removed covetousness and domanassa regarding the world. This is how a bhikkhu is with sati.

"And how does a bhikkhu act with clear comprehension?
Here, a bhikkhu acts with clear comprehension when going forward and returning; when looking ahead and looking away; when bending and stretching his limbs; when wearing his outer robe, carrying his bowl, and wearing his robes; when eating, drinking, chewing, and tasting; when defecating and urinating; and when walking, standing, sitting, falling asleep, waking up, speaking, and remaining silent. This is how a bhikkhu acts with clear comprehension.

"A bhikkhu should await his time with sati and clear comprehension. This is our instruction to you.

Contemplation of Sukhā Vedanā
"If, while a bhikkhu is dwelling thus—with sati, clearly comprehending, diligent, ardent, and resolute—a sukhā vedanā arises, he understands:
'This sukhā vedanā has arisen in me. And it is dependent, not independent. Dependent on what? Dependent on this very kāya. But this kāya is anicca, saṅkhata, and dependently arisen. Since this sukhā vedanā has arisen dependent on a kāya that is anicca, saṅkhata, and dependently arisen, how could it be niccā?'

"He dwells discerning anicca, vanishing, virāga, cessation, and relinquishment in the kāya and in the sukhā vedanā. As he dwells discerning (the aspects of) anicca, decay,

fading away, ceasing, and relinquishment in the kāya and in the sukhā vedanā, the underlying tendency to rāga towards the kāya and the sukhā vedanā is abandoned.

Contemplation of Dukkhā Vedanā

"If, while dwelling thus with sati, clearly comprehending, diligent, ardent, and resolute, a dukkhā vedanā arises, he understands:
'This dukkhā vedanā has arisen in me. And it is dependent, not independent. Dependent on what? Dependent on this very kāya. But this kāya is anicca, saṅkhata, and dependently arisen. Since this dukkhā vedanā has arisen dependent on a kāya that is anicca, saṅkhata, and dependently arisen, how could it be niccā?'

"He dwells discerning anicca, decay, fading away, ceasing, and relinquishment in the kāya and in the dukkhā vedanā. As he dwells discerning anicca... and relinquishment in the kāya and in the dukkhā vedanā, the underlying tendency to paṭigha towards the kāya and the dukkhā vedanā is abandoned.

Contemplation of Adukkhamasukhā Vedanā

"If, while dwelling thus with sati, clearly comprehending, diligent, ardent, and resolute, an adukkhamasukhā vedanā arises, he understands:
'This adukkhamasukhā vedanā has arisen in me. And it is dependent, not independent. Dependent on what? Dependent on this very kāya. But this kāya is anicca, saṅkhata, and dependently arisen. Since this adukkhamasukhā vedanā has arisen dependent on a kāya that is anicca, saṅkhata, and dependently arisen, how could it be niccā?'

"He dwells discerning anicca, decay, fading away, ceasing, and relinquishment in the kāya and in the adukkhamasukhā vedanā. As he dwells discerning anicca... and relinquishment in the kāya and in the adukkhamasukhā vedanā, the underlying tendency to avijjā towards the kāya and the adukkhamasukhā vedanā is abandoned.

Detachment from Vedanā

"If he experiences a sukha vedanā, he understands that it is anicca, not held to, and not delighted in.
If he experiences a dukkha vedanā, he understands that it is anicca, not held to, and not delighted in.

If he experiences an adukkhamasukha vedanā, he understands that it is anicca, not held to, and not delighted in.

"If he experiences a sukha vedanā, he experiences it detached.
If he experiences a dukkha vedanā, he experiences it detached.
If he experiences an adukkhamasukha vedanā, he experiences it detached.

"Experiencing a vedanā terminating with the kāya, he understands: 'I am experiencing a vedanā terminating with the kāya.' Experiencing a vedanā terminating with life, he understands: 'I am experiencing a vedanā terminating with life.' He understands: 'With the breakup of the kāya and the exhaustion of life, right here all felt experience, being not delighted in, will become cool.'

The Simile of the Oil Lamp

"Just as an oil lamp burns dependent on oil and a wick, and from the exhaustion of that very oil and wick, it is extinguished through lack of fuel; even so, experiencing a vedanā terminating with the kāya, a bhikkhu understands: 'I experience a vedanā terminating with the kāya.' Experiencing a vedanā terminating with life, he understands: 'I experience a vedanā terminating with life.' He understands: 'With the breakup of the kāya and the exhaustion of life, right here all felt experience, being not delighted in, will become cool.'"